

**REVIEW OF**  
***ŻYCIE JOSEPHA CONRADA-KORZENIOWSKIEGO***  
**(THE LIFE OF JOSEPH CONRAD-KORZENIOWSKI),**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> ED. VOLS. I-II. EDITED BY ZDZISŁAW NAJDER.**  
**LUBLIN: GAUDIUM PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2006**

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The biography of Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski by Zdzisław Najder is seen as a classical work in Conrad studies all over the world. The book was first published in Polish in 1980, followed by English and French translations and later by a second Polish edition (1996). It shed new light on the English writer and sparked great interest among Polish and foreign scholars alike. The book's reviews have a long history: Najder's work has been examined by Edward Said, Jeffrey Meyers, Keith Carabine, Todd K. Bender, John Batchelor, Douglas Hewitt, Sylvère Monod, Andrzej Busza, Maria Janion and others. In the view of the majority of reviewers this is the best of the currently available biographies of the author of *Heart of Darkness*. The reason for this is that it gives the most convincing and comprehensive account of the complex life of the writer who, despite his choice to be an émigré, was deeply involved in his nation's history.

In his book Najder emphasizes the impact of the writer's traumatic childhood experiences on his later life: the five-year-old Conrad accompanied his parents in their exile – first in the north of Russia and later in Chernihiv in the Ukraine. He was deeply affected by his parents' premature deaths and – mainly out of a fear of being conscripted into the Tsarist army – had no choice but to leave his homeland. However, Najder does not overestimate the impact of this psychological burden. Highlighting the role of Conrad's father, Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski, the author attempts to portray him both as an uncompromising man and a caring husband and protector; a mediocre lyricist but at the same time a rather good dramatist; a great patriot and a political conspirator, but also a man who was interested in the current social and economic issues concerning his country; a melancholic, but also a consummate organiser of political life in Warsaw shortly before the outbreak of the January Uprising. Najder also objectively portrays the young Konrad Korzeniowski's second guardian, namely his

uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski. He does not accuse Bobrowski of coldness, but stresses his sensible yet caring attitude to his nephew.

Unlike other biographers, Najder tries to give a comprehensive illustration of Conrad's Polish and noble roots, drawing on letters, documents and memoirs connected with the Korzeniowski and Bobrowski families. His version of the writer's biography appears to be the most convincing one, as the author, thanks to his Polish origins, is best equipped to understand and explain the nuances of Polish 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history, as well as the whole cultural context connected with the writer's noble origins. Najder frequently emphasises that, in a way, Conrad inherited the multicultural tradition of the Polish Commonwealth before the Partitions, which can be seen in his interest in various cultures, including the most distant and exotic ones.

Najder does not shirk the challenge of trying to provide a factual explanation of controversial and unclear episodes in Conrad's life, such as the mysterious "rows" during his stay in Marseille. All his conjectures, however, are supported by numerous quotations from Korzeniowski's correspondence. Conrad is portrayed here as a rather complex individual, not devoid of emotional states which are difficult to explain. However, Najder does not attach excessive importance to the psychological sphere. In a very matter-of-fact manner he tries to depict Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski as a man who had his own weaknesses and, just like anyone else, experienced moments of doubt and despair. Yet the author does not try at all cost to attribute any strange behaviour on Conrad's part to neurosis or depression, which could easily be explained by the writer's childhood suffering. Depicting the writer's life, Najder analyses concrete situations and on this basis tries to find possible motives for the writer's conduct.

The new exclusive 2006 edition of Najder's biography differs from the previous editions, as it contains certain modifications and additions which illustrate a certain shift in the author's views on the role of the Polish cultural background in Conrad's life and works. Najder's concern for accuracy is even clearer than in the previous editions. This can be seen in the corrections and changes in the text. To give but one example: the dates of many letters written by Conrad have been corrected. One could say that this empirical approach corresponds with Conrad's principle of faithfulness. In this case it manifests itself as respect for biographical detail. This becomes particularly visible in the large number of quotations from letters and documents, among which the most valuable ones are those from letters between Conrad and his Polish addressees.

Furthermore, in this edition Najder devotes more space to the diplomatic efforts which were made by Conrad during World War I to help Poland regain her independence. However, he emphasises Conrad's distance from the political factions which were active on Polish territory at that time. What is clearly visible in this book is an attempt to show the multidimensionality of Konrad Korzeniowski's personality – Conrad is presented as a writer, a sailor, but above all a man burdened with painful personal experiences resulting from his belonging to a subjugated nation. Significantly, in Najder's view, the Polish background for Conrad's writing must not be disregarded. As the author of the biography puts it himself in the foreword to the new edition, he

treats this background “not as a marginal matter or a secret key that unlocks everything”, but as an integral factor which allows us to better explain the particular nature of the writer’s life and works.

Najder is very precise in his analyses. He provides concrete examples to support his theses – as, for example, when he explains the reasons for Conrad’s controversial marriage to the uneducated Miss Jessie George. Making frequent references to the opinions and theses of other biographers, Najder always expresses his own approach to them. He does stress his own view, but remains fair and honest with his readers.

Najder interestingly discusses the sensitive issue of Conrad’s borrowings from other well-known writers. He explains that Konrad Korzeniowski was well aware of his membership of the universe of European culture and consequently included in his novels and stories motifs derived from the three national cultures with which he was most familiar. According to his Polish biographer, Conrad “adopted ethical and historical problems from Polish culture, artistry from French culture, and language and maritime experiences from English culture”.

This biography gives us the portrait of a prolific writer who had a wide range of ideas and freely transformed previous literary models. His works demonstrate modern originality and a courageous choice of artistic subjects, thanks to which they can also be attractive to contemporary readers. This biography by a Polish author largely liberates Conrad from stereotypes, especially from his stereotypical perception as a cold individual who tended to distance himself from people and the world – a view that is belied by Korzeniowski’s letters and many previously unknown facts from his life. These documents also reveal that Conrad can still surprise us, not only as a writer, but also as a man who is at once ordinary and extraordinary.

Translated by Ewa Kowal